

# The Peter Pan Syndrome<sup>1</sup>

## (Spiritual Adolescence)

### INTRODUCTION

A. In our survey of the stages of spiritual growth, we come to “spiritual adolescence.”

1. As noted in outline four,<sup>2</sup> this stage is not as clearly defined in Scripture as the other stages, but there are a few hints (1 John 2:12-14).

2. One writer described this stage in this way:

- a. This is a period of *extremes*.
- b. The Christian says, “Show me.”
- c. The focus is *self*.

B. The emphasis of our study will be *the barrier of spiritual adolescence*.

1. In the physiological world, many resist “growing up”; they become perpetual adolescents in adult skins.

- a. This idea is in the book *The Peter Pan Syndrome: Men Who Have Never Grown Up* by Dan Kiley.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The concept of “spiritual adolescence” comes from Charles Swindoll, and much of the material in this lesson has been adapted from a series of sermons by him. The material on physical adolescence, however, is from a wide variety of sources. Please note the two “supplementary studies” in the outline. These are basically designed to be studied on your own. They illustrate beautifully the principles emphasized in the lesson.

<sup>2</sup>See the lesson “God has a Plan for Your Spiritual Life.”

<sup>3</sup>Dan Kiley, *The Peter Pan Syndrome: Men Who Have Never Grown Up* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1983).

b. Two illustrations of this are:

- (1) The husband who still buys things he cannot afford
- (2) The wife who can never be satisfied

2. This is even so in the spiritual world. Some of us have reached the point in our spiritual growth where, from here on, it will really *cost* to “grow up into Christ,” and we are not willing to pay the price. So we remain in a spiritual “twilight zone” between spiritual childhood and spiritual maturity.

C. The purpose of this presentation is to encourage us to make it over that final hurdle. For many of us, this could be the most important study regarding “growing up into Christ.”

### I. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “ADOLESCENCE”?

A. The physiological realm

1. “Adolescence” is *not* a physical term as such. It is a term coined early in this century from *adolescere* (“to grow up”). It is a time of *transition*—transition from childhood to adulthood. It begins with puberty (about 12 or 13) and ends when the child is no longer financially dependent on his parents (usually be-

tween 18-21). It can be divided in various ways:

- a. Early adolescence (junior high), middle adolescence (senior high), later adolescence (college-age)
  - b. Early adolescence (approximately 13-15), late adolescence (approximately 16-21)
2. Often this is a traumatic time for both parents and their children.
- a. It is generally a time of:
    - (1) Dramatic physical change
    - (2) A feeling of low self-worth
    - (3) The greatest pressure to conform to the crowd
    - (4) Confusion and questioning as the teen struggles to make beliefs his own
    - (5) A search for personal identity (separate from the family)
    - (6) Emotional highs and lows
    - (7) Intense concern with physical drives
    - (8) The diligent effort to become independent
  - b. The goal of this stage, for both parents and adolescents, is for the young person, at the end of this stage, to be a responsible, independent adult—ready to make his own way in the world.

#### B. The spiritual realm

1. I am identifying the “spiritual adolescence” stage as that point at which a Christian has progressed beyond the elementary aspects of Christianity and has the *capacity* to be an outstanding servant of the Lord, but is still lacking in spiritual maturity.
2. He has acquired basic knowledge and skills. He obviously has the capabilities to fulfill his God-given role. But he is still vacillating between spiritual childhood and adulthood. He sometimes acts like an adult, but reverts to childish ways (cf. Revelation 3:15). He has not yet “paid the price” to become an adult. He must still get over this last hurdle, through this last barrier.

## II. NOTHING IS WRONG WITH ADOLESCENCE AS SUCH.

A. Every stage of growth is natural and right, part of the growing-up process. Adolescence is no exception.

1. One good book on this is *Teenage Is Not a Disease* by Charles M. Schulz. (Note Ecclesiastes 11:9a.)
2. Wise parents prepare their children for this stage.
  - a. “This will be happening to your body . . . and to your emotions. You’ll be on an emotional roller coaster, but if we stick together and love each other, we’ll all get through it okay. There will be rough times, but there will also be good times. When it gets really rough, keep reminding yourself: ‘This, too, shall pass.’”
  - b. James Dobson’s materials on preparing for adolescence are good:
    - (1) *Hide or Seek*<sup>4</sup>
    - (2) *The Strong-Willed Child*<sup>5</sup>
    - (3) *Preparing for Adolescence* (book and workbook)<sup>6</sup>
    - (4) *Preparing for Adolescence* (the tapes)<sup>7</sup>

B. In fact adolescence has some very special qualities about it that we need to retain. (Note 1 Timothy 4:12.)

1. A teen *committed* to a cause can accomplish amazing things—mentally, physically, etc. (Just think of the Olympics.) Here are a few youthful qualities all of us need:
  - a. Idealism: The quality of having high ideals
  - b. Enthusiasm: The capacity to get *excited* over a cause

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<sup>4</sup>James Dobson, *Hide or Seek* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1979), 118-42.

<sup>5</sup>James Dobson, *The Strong-Willed Child* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1978), 208-10.

<sup>6</sup>James Dobson, *Preparing for Adolescence* (Santa Ana, Calif.: Vision House Publishers, 1978).

<sup>7</sup>James Dobson, *Preparing for Adolescence* (Santa Ana, Calif.: Vision House Publishers [One Way Library]). A set of six cassette tapes can be ordered by writing Box 952, Temple City, CA 91780.

- c. Flexibility: The willingness to learn new things and to try new things
  - d. Courage: The determination to stand up for (and to speak out on) what he really believes in
2. The Bible has many examples of adolescents who were *committed* to the Lord and who thus *used* their special qualities to His glory.
- a. Isaac (Genesis 22)
    - (1) Here he is in his teens (probably between 13 and 18)
    - (2) His father's test is also *his* test.
    - (3) Notice verse 7. There is no battle here!
  - b. Samuel (1 Samuel 3)
    - (1) This is a very low period in the history of the Israelites (v. 1). Samuel is growing up with an over-indulgent man and his two ungodly sons.
    - (2) But Samuel's heart is *receptive* to the Lord (v. 10), and thus he is prepared for great service to Him (vv. 19, 20).
  - c. Josiah (2 Chronicles 34)
    - (1) This is another low-tide period. There has been no integrity in the office of king: Manasseh, Amon, and now Josiah, who is only eight years old (v. 1)! What chance does he have?!
    - (2) But what great things this young man accomplished for the Lord! Seldom do we see such commitment to God's way (vv. 2-7)!
  - d. Daniel (Daniel 1)
    - (1) Judah has fallen into the hands of the Babylonians. The choicest young men are taken to Babylon to learn Babylonian ways and to serve in the king's court. Among them are Daniel and his three friends (v. 6).
    - (2) Daniel knows God's law better than he knows the Chaldean lifestyle—and he "purposed in his heart that he would not defile him[self]" (v. 8). He risks the wrath of the king to do what is right!

- C. So let it be stressed that we are *not* saying that . . .
  - 1. Physical adolescents are to be looked down upon . . .
  - 2. Or that spiritual adolescents have no place in the kingdom.

### III. IT IS NOT GOD'S WILL THAT WE STAY AN ADOLESCENT.

- A. It is God's will that we *continue* to grow and mature. Just as we were to put away spiritual babyhood and childhood (1 Corinthians 13:11), so we should put away spiritual adolescence.
  - B. What should we put away? *Some* characteristics of adolescence that are *not* so commendable.
    - 1. Just as some young people in the Bible serve as examples to us all, there are those who did not "get it all together" (e.g., Cain, Esau, Absalom, Delilah, Salome, etc.)
    - 2. Some special challenges every adolescent must meet are these:
      - a. To become more *stable*. This means avoiding the extreme highs and lows and gaining more self-control.
      - b. To become more *discerning*
        - (1) In the effort to become independent of parents, teens often reject the advice of their parents while accepting without question the opinions of their peers.
        - (2) Teens tend to live in the present, with little thought for tomorrow. They tend to be guided more by feelings and immediate "needs" than common sense.
      - c. To become more *reliable*. They must realize that to be treated like an adult, one must *act* like an adult, including accepting the *responsibilities* of an adult (becoming a *responsible* person).
      - d. To become *self-disciplined*. This means being able to do what should

be done without the help or encouragement of anyone else.

C. The Bible is full of examples of those who had grown up physically, but who were still adolescents at heart.

1. Three men who did not meet the challenges just noted are these:

a. John Mark (Acts 12; 13)

(1) The first mention of John Mark is in 12:12. Barnabas and Saul take him back to Antioch (12:25). Barnabas and Saul start on the first missionary journey (13:1-3), taking John Mark with them (13:5).

(2) One can imagine John Mark's youthful enthusiasm and idealism. But that idealism came face to face with reality.

(a) They had a face-to-face confrontation with evil (13:6-11).

(b) They faced the perils of the unknown (13:13a).

(c) As a result, John Mark quit (13:13b; see also 15:38). "Adolescents" (whether young or old) get discouraged when things do not turn out as they anticipate; they give up when the going gets rough.

b. Demas

(1) The first references to Demas are commendable (Colossians 4:14; Philemon 22, 24). But then he left Paul (2 Timothy 4:9-11). The key words are:

(a) "Deserted." The Greek word means "to abandon, leave in the lurch, to let someone down."

(b) "World." Trench says that the Greek word refers to "that floating mass of thoughts, opinions, maxims, speculations, hopes, impulses, . . . at any time current in the world, . . . which constitute a most

real and effective power, being the moral, or immoral, atmosphere which at every moment of our lives we inhale, again inevitably to exhale, . . . the subtle informing spirit of the . . . world of men who are living alienated . . . from God."<sup>8</sup>

(2) How did this happen?

(a) Imagine Demas' first excitement at associating with Paul. But then imagine as the days go by, and he sees the contrast between the dreary cell of Paul and the glittering lifestyle of Rome.

(b) At last Demas shows that he is caught in the Peter Pan Syndrome; he is still "adolescent" in thought.

1) He is unable to discern the truly valuable.

2) He is not concerned about the long view but interested more in the moment.

3) He does not carry through on his commitment to Paul or the Lord; he is irresponsible.

4) Apparently he is not concerned about the consequences.

(3) Unfortunately, Demas is still very much alive today!

c. Diotrophes

(1) Diotrophes is mentioned almost in passing, but what little we know of him is disturbing (3 John 9, 10).

(2) We do not have enough information on Diotrophes to speak conclusively on his motivations,

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<sup>8</sup>Richard C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), 217-18.

- but he certainly seems to manifest an “adolescent” spirit:
- (a) He wants his own way and rejects the word of one older and wiser (John).
  - (b) Possibly without intending to, he is a disruptive element in God’s family.
    - 1) Saying hateful things about his brethren
    - 2) Setting brother against brother
  - (3) Do *we* ever demonstrate the spirit of Diotrephes?
    - (a) Are we determined to have our way regardless of the cost?
    - (b) Do we frequently manifest a *disagreeable* spirit in the church? at home?
2. A supplementary study is this: A whole congregation that resisted growing up—Corinth!
- a. Some typical “adolescent” problems are these:
    - (1) Struggling with relationships (1 Corinthians 1:11; 3:3; 11:18)
    - (2) Problems with immorality (1 Corinthians 5:1, 2ff.; 11:21)
    - (3) The inability to couple the idea of personal liberty with the idea of *responsibility* (1 Corinthians 8—10)
    - (4) A lack of concern for others (1 Corinthians 8:10-13; 10:24)
    - (5) An unwillingness to admit wrong (1 Corinthians 5:2; etc.)
  - b. Paul’s challenge to them (and us) is this:
    - (1) *Stop* acting like children (1 Corinthians 3:1, 2; 13:11; 14:20)
    - (2) *Start* acting like adults (1 Corinthians 16:13, 14).

#### IV. WHY THEN DO WE NOT GROW UP?

- A. As already noted, many in the natural world do not grow up emotionally *because they do not want to pay the price*.
1. Excerpts from *The Peter Pan Syndrome* can be given here.

2. Too many want the *benefits* of adulthood *without the cost*.
    - a. We live in a society that says, “You can have it *all*.” This is adolescent thinking.
    - b. The mature mind realizes that you *cannot* have it all. You have to make choices; you have to have priorities. (An illustration is in Matthew 6:24.)
      - (1) If you get married (and want to make a success of that marriage), you have to give up some personal freedom.
      - (2) If you have a child (and are concerned about rearing that child in the right way), you have to give up some time.
- B. This is even so in the spiritual realm.
1. It is not that hard to be baptized and then be a “so-so,” “hit-or-miss,” “hot-and-cold” Christian. But it *costs* something to really *grow up* into Christ! And apparently many are not willing to pay the price.
    - a. It *costs* the sacrifice of the *comfortable*.
      - (1) We are creatures of habit. We like the familiar; we resist the unfamiliar. We like the known; we resist the unknown. We prefer the status quo; we resist that which *challenges* us.
      - (2) It *hurts* to *change* (James 1:3; Hebrews 5:8, 9).
    - b. It *costs* the sacrifice of our own *selfish will*.
      - (1) We have things we want, even things we think we *deserve*. When we “surrender” to Christ, we do so with a few reservations. We are willing to be Christians as long as we can do so and *still* have a few things our way.
      - (2) It has been said that we want Christ as *Savior* but not as *Lord*. But we cannot have one without the other (Matthew 16:24, 25)!

- c. It *costs* the sacrifice of *time* and *effort*.
  - (1) There are no shortcuts to growth, no “short courses” to spiritual maturity.
  - (2) We can kid ourselves by comparing ourselves with others (2 Corinthians 10:12). But the question is not whether we favorably or unfavorably compare with others, but *are we reaching our spiritual potential?*
- 2. A supplementary study is this: An illustration of a group of Christians who resisted growing up would be the original recipients of the book of Hebrews.
  - a. They had made a good start (Hebrews 6:10; 10:32-34).
  - b. But now, enough time had gone by for them to be mature and they were not (Hebrews 5:12-14). They still needed to *grow up* (Hebrews 6:1-3ff.)!
  - c. For some reason they were resisting growing up. Why? Some hints are found in the book.
    - (1) They were taking the path of the least resistance (2:1ff.).
    - (2) They had grown *careless* with the Word (2:3).
    - (3) The things of Christ had become commonplace in their hearts (3:12, 13).
    - (4) They did not *act by faith* on what they heard (4:2).
    - (5) They evidently did not want the *pain* of growth (5:8, 9).
    - (6) They had become indifferent (5:11).
    - (7) Growth was apparently not that important to them (5:12).
    - (8) They had not become *students* of the Word (5:13).
    - (9) They lacked discernment (5:14). They saw obstacles simply as problems rather than as opportunities for growth.
    - (10) They were apparently *satisfied* with the growth they had already made (6:1, 2).

- ## V. LET US BREAK THROUGH THE BARRIER OF SPIRITUAL ADOLESCENCE.
- A. In the series, as we have discussed each stage of spiritual growth, I have stressed what all of us can do to help each other through that stage. To *some* extent it is still true that we need to help each other through the stage of spiritual adolescence.
    - 1. For instance, few ever made it successfully through physical adolescence without the aid of some concerned adult.
      - a. As already suggested, parents need to try to prepare their preadolescents for this stage.
      - b. And *during* the stage, parents need to be patient, loving, supportive, and available—giving advice when it is called for and a firm hand when it is appropriate.
    - 2. Even so we can strive to be supportive and encouraging with each other as we struggle with this last barrier to maturity.
  - B. But by the time one reaches this point of development, the responsibility of further growth is *mainly* on the shoulders of the spiritual adolescent.
    - 1. Whether we are talking about physical or spiritual adolescence, we have to face the fact that once our child or fellow Christian reaches this point we become rather limited in what we can do. From this point on *they* have to accept more and more responsibility.
    - 2. Or to turn it around: If *we* are in this stage, it is basically *up to us*. Each one of us need to take an honest look at ourselves.
      - a. *Am I stalled in the stage of spiritual adolescence?* Look back at the characteristics of adolescence. Is my spiritual life characterized by extreme ups and downs? When I am given a task to perform, do I carry through on it without anyone having to remind me or encourage me? Or do I become distracted or even discouraged and quit?
      - b. *If I am still a spiritual adolescent, let me*

determine, with God's help, to break through this last barrier to growth.

- (1) Let me work on *specific problems*.
- (2) Above all, let me work on my *commitment*, for this is the key.
- (3) Let me be willing to *pay the price*.

1. A challenge is here for *physical adolescents*: Determine to *grow up*.
2. But above all there is a challenge for *all of us* (of *any age*) who find ourselves as *spiritual adolescents*: Determine to grow up.

## CONCLUSION

A. What a challenge!

B. If you need to respond to the Lord's invitation, please come.

—David Roper

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# Applying Scripture to Life

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## *"Rent-a-Friend"*

A newspaper article reported a video tape that is now available entitled "Rent-a-Friend." That is what you do. Rent (or buy) the tape, and the person on the tape becomes your friend. It is a 42-minute VHS tape. During that time a pleasant-looking, sincere-sounding, soft spoken actor sits in a dark blue chair. He tells you that his name is Sam. He wears a white knit sweater, a light blue shirt, and brown pants. Next to him is a warmly glowing table lamp.

The actor does not "perform"—at least he does not give the impression of performing. He simply talks to the viewer as one friend would talk to another. For example, Sam looks right into the camera and says, "So tell me about your parents. They are really neat people, aren't they?" (Pause.) "I'm serious. I can tell by looking at you." There is one moment on the

video tape that really stands out. Sam is talking earnestly with the viewer in the living room. All of a sudden, a telephone next to Sam's chair starts ringing. Sam continues speaking to the viewer, but the phone keeps ringing. So Sam turns to his side, picks the telephone receiver out of its cradle, lets the phone stop ringing, and then hangs the phone back up.

"It's all right," Sam says to the viewer. "I'd rather talk to you. They can call back."

Bill and Linda Swetmon,  
*Your Friendship Potential*

## *The Contrast*

A U.S. Army officer told of the contrast in his pupils during two different eras of teaching at the artillery training school at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. In 1958-60 the attitude was so lax that the instructors had a problem getting the men to stay awake to listen. During the 1965-

67 classes, however, the men, hearing the same basic lectures, were alert and took copious notes. The reason: These men knew that in less than six weeks they would be going to Vietnam. How carefully we should study God's Word in view of eternity.

## *Everyone Has 'em!*

Everyone has problems. There is the story of the man who had a reputation for extreme brevity. He was asked to give a speech. His topic was problems. He was told that a good speech had three points and a poem. He worked hard on developing three points and a closing poem. The title of his speech was "Problems." His speech follows:

Point #1: I got 'em.

Point #2: You got 'em.

Point #3: We all got 'em.

Closing poem: Adam had 'em.

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